

starters for Sunday

Sixth Sunday in Lent

Palm/Passion Sunday

29 March 2015

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Nigel Robb, St Andrews Presbytery Clerk, for his thoughts on Passion/Palm Sunday.

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Quick Guide...

Helping people prepare for reading the Bible in worship can make a real difference. Overcoming nerves, reading in ways suitable to the text, speaking clearly etc.

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)

[Mark 11: 1-11](#)

This is critical point in Mark's gospel – the entry into Jerusalem and the whole Gospel is focused now upon the events taking place there. Some have suggested that the previous ten chapters are really only a prologue to this final description of controversy and challenge to the religious and political hierarchy of his day. For some, the whole purpose of the Gospel of Mark is to tell the story of the painful end of the ministry of Jesus.

The text is full of allusions to other texts from the Old Testament (Judas Maccabees in II Maccabees 10: 7; Solomon in I Kings 1: 32-48; Jehu in II Kings 9: 12 -13; David in Psalm 118: 26). This may suggest that, while Mark may have been writing to the Church in Rome, he was familiar with much of the literature and tradition of Jewish history and religious life.

Mark says they spread their coats on the way with the branches. In doing so was a touch of the serious and the symbolic. They had done that before in royal processions (for example II Kings 9: 13). They did this when Jehu was anointed king of Israel, and threw their jackets and leafy branches on the steps in front of Jehu and proclaimed him king.

This is a very public event in the ministry of Jesus in contrast perhaps to the earlier events when the theme in Mark seems to be the 'messianic secret'. Jesus courts the adulation and the antagonism, the cheers and the jeers, the affection and the anger, of the crowds by this act. There may be a lot of irony in the telling of the story, with its subversion of the usual ambitious symbolism with the donkey and the fact that he was not welcomed as a hero by the political establishment. He never even attempted a public entry to the temple as a figure of religious significance and a teacher of repute and reputation for interpretation and authoritative teaching. The emphasis in Mark is far from triumphalist tone of Matthew's account.



The whole story may serve to explain the opposition of the Pharisees which is so prominent in the story of Holy Week. They could see him as serious threat to their self-interest and security in the current political settlement which protected the religious establishment and allowed them such privilege.

People expected a hero, a messiah, who would instigate a Kingdom like that of David, whom they idolised, believing that whatever came would be better than what they had under the power of Rome. Jesus comes as a hero, but subverts their expectations, and disappoints their dreams. There is a huge amount of ambiguity in the account here, with the threat of disappointment among the highly charged atmosphere of Jerusalem at the Passover. Perhaps this may explain why the crowds are so fickle – if they were the same group – and their lack of enthusiastic support of him before Pilate. Their perspective may be understandable - if not excusable - and they preferred Barabbas, a robber and rebel who promised the military victory and an end to the oppression endured. They longed for and anticipated a critical intervention by the one called by God to free them.

[Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29](#)

In contrast to the story in Mark, this Psalm describes the celebratory and triumphal nature of the entry of a king or hero into Jerusalem, after achieving success and victory. It reflects the emphasis which is central to the biblical narrative that all that happens as a result of the magnificent nature of the God. God is seen as the one who has rescued the hero from the possibility of defeat and he has triumphed due to the gracious action and intervention of God. God is seen as the source of power in all events.

Some have interpreted this as a direct foreshadowing of the journey of Jesus. Jesus is seen by them as the one who has face every threat and danger and overcome them through the activity and power of God.



Palm Sunday

What do we associate with it?

- A conflation of the accounts in the different Gospels, and memories of Sunday School and traditional pictures in bibles.
- Palm branches waving.
- Cheerful singing of favourite and familiar hymns.
- Happy images of the crowds welcoming Jesus, arriving on the back of a donkey.
- The noise of jubilant celebration and expectation.
- A warm and comfortable memory, shielding us from reality and allowing us to bask in sentimental indulgence.

What then of the reality?

You and I know the story like the back of our hands. It is the Sunday before Easter; Jesus borrows a donkey, rides into the city of Jerusalem which is packed with Passover crowds. They greet him with wild enthusiasm -- throw their clothes on the street for him to ride over, cut palm fronds and wave them in the air. They shout "hosanna," a traditional Hebrew greeting.

'Hosanna' is such a funny word, that word they used to greet him. No one ever says it any more. 'Hallelujah', maybe, but not 'Hosanna'. Scholars do not really know what it means for sure. Their best guess is that it is a contraction of a couple of Hebrew words: yah-sha, meaning to save or deliver, and naw, meaning to beseech or pray. So, our best guess at a translation is, "We beseech you to save us."

The problem is that the story is so familiar that we are apt to look right past the glaring fact that Jesus set up this whole scene for a reason. To get the parody you have to remember the historical context. When Jesus enters Jerusalem, two things are happening, paradoxically, at the same time. First, Jesus is claiming the authority of Messiah. Second, he is enacting a piece of political theatre, making a joke on Rome by staging a parody of an imperial parade. He is demonstrating that his power is not at all the kind of power exercised by the Roman occupation, and not exactly the kind of power anyone expected in a Messiah. There is a kind of foolishness in the image of a king who enters the city riding a donkey, straddling the beast, trying to balance himself and stay upright.



The Jewish nation had been writhing under the boot of imperial Rome for over a century. Before the Romans it had been one nasty imperial power after another. Rome was huge. Israel was tiny. The only hope to get out of this mess was the promised Messiah. A lot of people expected this national saviour to show up any day.

Jerusalem had seen a huge number of similar entries into its walls. Alexander the Great, Marcus Agrippa, King David and King Solomon, King Jehu, and the various governors, like Pilate, when they visited from Caesarea Philippi and the victorious Maccabees returning in triumph.

Popular opinion knew exactly what the scene would look like when the Messiah came. He would march into Jerusalem astride a great stallion, a mighty war horse. He would be leading a vast army. He would vanquish the despised Romans. He would march to his throne and be crowned King of the Jews. That was the dream.

The Palm Sunday reality was a living parody on that dream.

- No stallion for this Messiah, just a donkey on loan.
- No army, just a rag-tag assortment of unemployed fisherman, an errant tax collector and some vaguely disreputable women.
- This Messiah was no vanquisher of Romans, just a Galilean rabbi.
- There was a crown, but not the one anybody expected.
- There would be a throne, a throne on a hill named Calvary.
- In the end there would be a very great victory; the enemy would be vanquished, but not the enemy, or the victory anybody expected.

Jesus' Palm Sunday parody of worldly power is so obvious we miss it.

Charles Campbell of Duke Divinity School, offers a fresh view of this morning's parade which sets its powerlessness over against the power of Rome. He writes:

Jesus is turning imperial notions of power and rule on their head. His theatre is a humorous piece of political satire. In his "triumphal entry" Jesus lampoons the "powers that be" and their pretensions to glory and dominion, and he enacts an alternative to their way of domination. Riding on the colt, his feet possibly dragging on the ground, Jesus comes not as one who lords his



authority over others, but as one who humbly rejects domination. He comes not with pomp and wealth, but as one identified with the poor. He comes not as a mighty warrior, but as one who is vulnerable and refuses to rely on violence. Jesus here takes the role of a jester, who enacts in a humorous and disorienting way a totally different understanding of “rule” and invites people to see the world in a new way... And we thought he offered a serious challenge to Rome!

(Feasting on the Word, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 2010, page 157)

Two thousand years ago, the Roman government also prepared for Jewish Passover. Rome preserved its famous Pax Romana by stationing garrisons in major cities and playing warring factions off each other. The Roman Empire quashed rebellion by making examples of rebels, arresting and executing them publicly on wooden crosses. In Israel, Rome posted Roman governors such as the now-famous Pontius Pilate, but it also installed Jewish puppet kings, the Herods. As collaborators with the enemy, the puppet kings were hated by their own people. Working together, Rome and the Herods kept a tentative peace in Israel, but at the cost of harsh measures and intense resentment.

In the weeks leading up to Passover, thousands of Jewish pilgrims streamed to Jerusalem. As they gathered, hope for liberation from the occupying empire grew, rumours flew, and secret plans for revolution were hatched. Many Jews looked for the arrival of Messiah, a kingly person anointed by God to bring freedom. The occupying Roman military government grew skittish and made special preparations. They increased the military presence in Jerusalem and arrested any would-be Messiahs. Near Passover, the governor entered the city gates on a warhorse, traveling in an impressive procession of horses and men, decked with glinting swords, Roman shields, and imperial red uniforms.

The symbolism is powerful. Jesus arrived not as a military leader, not on a large charger, like Pilate. When Pilate came to Jerusalem to watch over the events and dangers of the Passover and its problematic citizens, he would make an entrance that was designed to intimidate or assert his authority. Yet the message of Jesus is far more revolutionary and powerful than any political and military ploy and plot.



In this staged parade in which Jesus rides into the holy city on a borrowed animal, he is performing a parody of imperial power. The image of a military parade into Jerusalem would have been familiar to that city's residents. Jesus' own meagre parade, however, had no swords, no steeds, no flags. Just a procession of disciples throwing their worn old fishermen's cloaks before the hooves of a donkey and shouting about peace in heaven.

The story is all too familiar, and we often forget how it ended. Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem on the back of donkey and the crowds roar their approval and they greet him like some sort of conquering hero, a political and military figure who will end their oppression under the hated Romans. We see their enthusiasm and hear their cries of 'Hosanna'. Perhaps its closest modern parallel is 'Freedom Now' - the cry that echoed in the Civil Rights Movement in the USA when the demonstrations demanded an end to racial discrimination and the cessation of prejudicial employment, educational and electoral laws.

This is not Mark's take on what is happening, the *triumphal* twist is Matthew's spin. The palms are exclusively John's. Matthew, Luke, and John all take us into the streets of the city, but Mark leaves us at the gate looking in. His Passion Sunday story is a flop by comparison if what you want is a rehearsal for Easter, a grand parade with floats and balloons and confetti tossed in the air. Mark takes Jesus only as far as the city's gate, where he dismounts, and goes alone to the Temple. There he takes a look, and Mark says, in a monumentally disappointing note that "as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve."

No cleansing of the temple, no crowds in the city, no children running beside the donkey; just "as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve." It is hard to tell from Mark's version what all the fuss is about. Is this a parade, a protest march, or a funeral procession? One thing is clear, Mark wants us to keep our eyes on Jesus, and not get swept up in the moment. Jesus will stir up the city, but not today. Today, he will look in the temple, and see what is there, and return to the suburbs. Mark downplays the entry because he knows the truth about the crowds. You cannot have a messiah by opinion poll. They wanted a king like David, so they welcomed him like that. "Blessed is the coming kingdom of David" they said as he passed by, but on the cross there would be nothing about him to make them think of David. How fickle this crowd. How shallow their praise.



By Friday they will be ready to lynch him. They were sickened by his teachings of peace and of turning the cheek and forgiving ones enemies and rendering to Caesar the things that are Caesar's. No wonder they spit on him, weak as he was. He did not act like David at all. For Mark's taste, this is a day of gathering clouds, a day when the inevitable suffering draws close, the portal through which we pass to Holy Week and all its solemn remembrance. How disappointing is that, with our 'Hosannas' all warmed up and our Easter eggs already bought. This cross in his future is not what we bargained for, because none of us does suffering very well. None of us likes to see the dark side of the human experience.

The whole event is filled with references to past glories and events. What is clear is that the Gospel is written as seen through the lens of Easter, and filled with references to the Old Testament.

There is no welcome in the Temple, a fact which is often overlooked. There is here an anti-climactic conclusion. It foreshadows the description of the events of the next day when Jesus enters the Temple and overturns the tables of the money changers and causes mayhem among those who are occupying it. He receives no welcome then either, but is regarded as a menace and a danger to the civil peace and the religious authorities. His action then provokes the religious establishment to act decisively.

Annie Dillard, the American author, says:

'Why do people in churches like cheerful tourists on a packaged tour of the absolute? Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke? We are like little children playing on the floor with chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT. It is foolish to wear straw or velvet hats to church. We should all be wearing crash helmets. The ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash us and strap us to our pews, for their living God may draw us out to where we can never return.'

Here we are invited to go 'on the way with Jesus'. This is a theme of Mark. Here at the end of the journey, in Jerusalem, some things become clearer and more obvious – but the journey is not complete for us - we are learning –like the disciples about what it means - and it is often not what we would like to think.



A student in New Testament studies complained to his teacher, 'I am not comfortable with a God like this'. The teacher remarked that his discomfort was a sign of his developing understanding because he was rejecting the idea that he should expect to find God comfortable. This God who is not comfortable to us or our ideal and ethos is the God we see in the actions of Jesus on Palm Sunday.

Jesus disappoints us and refuses to be forced into our mould and pattern and does not allow us to use him to sanction and support our prejudices and aspirations. Instead the story of Palm Sunday subverts and undermines our wish for Jesus to be what we would like him to be, supportive of our middle class morality and ethos, and our western outlook on the world. Instead he comes to us, as he did long ago, to turn our expectations upside down, and frustrate our hopes for something easy and acceptable, achieved with no pain or effort.

We are invited to go on journey which opens us to criticism and challenge and unpopularity. Following Jesus will not lead to civic receptions and adulations – but often rejection if it is really faithful to the way Jesus leads and the direction he points us towards. This is the challenge of going on such a Palm Sunday pilgrimage. Are we ready?

Time with children

There is an opportunity here to ask them to talk about parades and processions they have seen – from local festival and carnivals to football and national events. A palm branch, a flag, a banner of support of a team and all sorts of symbols could be used to illuminate the energy and the visual part of the story, and also some of the differences within the biblical account. They can be encouraged to tell what they know of the Palm Sunday story, and you may do a bit of exploring of the particular focus in the account in Mark's Gospel. The point could be made of the anti-climax or the fact that some people did not share the enthusiasm, and encourage them to see it as part of the story of Jesus and the disciples as Holy Week approaches.



Prayers

Collect

Lord Jesus Christ,
on the first Palm Sunday
you entered the rebellious city
where you were to die.
Enter our hearts, we pray,
and subdue them to yourself.
And as your disciples blessed your coming
and spread garments and branches in your way,
make us ready to lay at your feet
all that we have and are,
that we too may bless your coming
in the name of the Lord.

or

Almighty and ever-living God,
in tender love for all our human race
you sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ
to take our flesh
and suffer death upon a cross.
Grant that we may follow
the example of his great humility,
and share in the glory of his resurrection;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.



Call to worship

Leader Jesus the humble, obedient, suffering servant.

Jesus, the courageous and loyal in witness to God

Jesus, on the back of a donkey comes among his people

What is our response?

People To pray and praise, to gather together and listen once more to the story of Palm Sunday

To question our own understanding of what it means to be on the way to Jerusalem with Jesus

Leader Come, then in fear and trepidation, in anticipation and confidence, for God has come close to invite us to this service.

Come let us worship God

Adoration

God of every age and situation

We are caught again by the excitement of the crowd and the thrill of expectation.

We are eager to shout aloud our 'hosannas', knowing how often we have been saved from poor decisions, weak promises and difficult situations.

Knowing the end of the Holy Week Story, we can yell and shout and cry and laugh with the crowd who greet the Saviour of the World.

Hear us as we celebrate your generous love towards us.

Confession

We have forgotten that you love us in spite of our sin.

We recall your unqualified love which reaches us in our greed, our quarrels, our selfishness, and our indifference to the needs of those around us.

We are chastened by how easy it is for us to pass by on the other side of the road, and cry 'Hosanna' while crucifying with neglect of the poor, the hungry, and the powerless that have no voice.

We acknowledge that we participate in the destruction of creation.



We have conceived, spoken and acted in ways unworthy of our calling.
We have not lived as the redeemed, forgiven disciples of Jesus.

Petition

O God of history guides our future.
Where we are wrong, make us right.
Where we are proud, make us humble,
Where we are timid, make us courageous.
Where we are confused make us wise,
Continue to use us to fulfil your purposes and bring glory to your name.

Thanksgiving

O God of all the families of the earth,
We give thanks for the enthusiasm, simplicity and questioning of children.
We are grateful for the opportunities of family life, for it is the laboratory in which we learn of love and respect.
We are filled with praise as we recall the spontaneous in life:
The tumult of daily activities,
The refreshment of sleep;
The uncalculated kindness of friends;
The encouragement of growth in others;
The stunning honesty of children;
The tireless labours of all who work in unexciting and mundane ways to give young people the opportunity to develop,
Hear these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Intercession

Gracious and Loving God,
In silence we name those known to us who are struggling at this time with:
The brokenness of families...
The loss of dreams and illusions...
The problems of ill health and frailty...



The lack of forgiveness and sense of acceptance...

The desolation of grief and feelings of abandonment...

The pathetic and the powerless who indulge in manipulation and malevolence to demonstrate their importance...

Hear our prayers for them, and in mercy give them the necessary resources to go on in faith, relying on your power.

O God of glory and wonder,

We pray for our world that you might impart to the leaders of the nations and those in positions of responsibility, peace and clam judgment.

May the self-centred and selfish of the world be softened, remade, remoulded by the outpouring of the love of Christ through us?

Expose the pretentious and self-righteous in our society to the warmth of your love

Encourage the desolate and those afflicted by depression.

Enable the members of the church where it is persecuted, reviled, or apathetic, to claim their responsibilities as your children.

Open the hidebound to their wonderful possibilities of change and transformation.

Enlighten those locked in a dark tomb of passivity and desperate hopelessness, through Jesus Christ whose life and love had demonstrated to us the meaning of service, the supreme quality of obedience, and the true way of love. Amen

Musical Suggestions

CH4 364	All glory, laud, and honour
CH4 365	Ride on, ride on in majesty
CH4 367	Hosanna, loud hosanna
CH4 368	Shout, hosanna
CH4 370	Ride on, ride, this time is right



Additional material for Palm Sunday

Wendell Berry in his poem, *Do Not Be Ashamed*, captures the courage with which Jesus entered Jerusalem and the faith we are meant to keep if we are to be true to God and ourselves.

You will be walking some night
in the comfortable dark of your yard
and suddenly a great light will shine
round about you, and behind you
will be a wall you never saw before.

It will be clear to you suddenly
That you were about to escape,
and that you are guilty; you misread
the complex instructions, you are not
a member, you lost your card
or never had one. And you will know
that they have been there all along,
their eyes on your letters and books,
their hands in your pockets,
their ears wired to your bed.

Though you have done nothing shameful,
they will want you to be ashamed.

They will want you to kneel and weep
and say you should have been like them.

And once you say you are ashamed,
reading the page they hold out to you,
then such light as you have made
in your history will leave you.



They will no longer need to pursue you.
You will pursue them, begging forgiveness,
They will not forgive you.

There is no power against them,
only an inward clarity, unashamed,
that they cannot reach. Be ready.

When their light has picked you out
and their questions are asked, say to them:
“I am not ashamed.” A sure horizon
will come to you. The heron will begin
his evening flight from the hilltop.

Jesus, when he climbed on that donkey was not ashamed.



Additional Resources

Resourcing Mission



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#). Please check back regularly, as new items are being added all the time. If there is something you'd like to see on this new site, please [contact us](#) via the website.

Prayer Resources

These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. [Revealing Love](#) is available now from [St Andrew Press](#).



Music Resources

The hymns mentioned in this material are ideas of specific hymns you might choose for this week's themes. However, for some excellent articles on church music and ideas for new music resources, please check out our online music pages [Different Voices](#).

Preaching Resources



These materials are designed to be a starting point for what you might preach this Sunday. [Preachers Perspectives](#) is a resource where we have asked twelve preachers to share the insights they have gathered through their experiences of writing and delivering sermons regularly.

Scots Worship Resources

[The Kirk's Ear](#) - Scots in the Kirk series for Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, Pentecost and other times of the year

[Wurship Ouk bi Ouk](#) - Metrical psalms, hymns, prayers and words for worship

[Scots Sacraments](#) may give you helpful material if you are celebrating Communion or have a Baptism.

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev Nigel Robb for providing us with this Sunday's material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

